



# ☆ BOOTLEGGER JOE ☆

JOSEPH PATRICK KENNEDY, BANKER, was Boston's lace-curtain Irish contribution to Hollywood history, thanks to his takeover bid on Miss Gloria Swanson, Star—another Irish scrapper. The cast of characters in this drama of sex and moolah included Rose, Joe's wife, a quiet saint, and a roster of kiddies, some of whom would grow into fame, several struck down by tragedy.

Joe Kennedy's character was clear from the start: no fair-minded sportsman and gentleman, he—Joe was a tough competitor who loved to win and *hated* to lose. The Kennedys *would* win; what he couldn't do himself, his phalanx of sons would accomplish. That's why he had them. "Go for it!" was Big Joe's lifetime motto.

The class yearbook at Boston Latin, his boyhood school, predicted that Joe Kennedy would make his fortune in "a very roundabout way." This was a farsighted prediction, if the routes of Wall Street, bootleg Scotch, and Hollywood's Gloria Swanson could be considered roundabout.

At Harvard, Joe applied his yell of "Go for it!" to the challenge of sports. In no time at all, he was captain of the baseball team, driving it on to victory. And, like all else he touched, sports yielded useful lessons for his career. "Remember," he liked to say, "if you can't be captain, don't play."

After he graduated from Harvard and was in possession of a small nest egg, he decided to be a millionaire by age thirty-five, and he made it. Never mind how; he made it.

At twenty-five, he was Boston's youngest bank president. "It's no crime to be young," he commented. Joe Kennedy operated as a lone wolf, alert to tips on Wall Street, keeping his ears perked for gossip that might provide useful information, yet secretive about his own dealings. With the advent of that Great Folly, the 18th Amendment, his Irish good sense told him that human nature would overcome silly legislation. Clandestine boatloads of the finest Scotch and Irish whiskies and French champagne soon crossed the "Big Pond," bound for Kennedy's secret warehouses on both coasts. "Bit of a gamble" that paid off handsomely: Joe Kennedy, dynasty-founder, was, during the Twenties, Hollywood's top-drawer booze connection, the "Real Thing" bootlegger. And he multiplied his investment of a few million in booze into a family fortune of many millions, a fortune based on hooch that continues to flow to this day.

Kennedy was not, however, a gambler. He analyzed the difference between gambling and speculation: "The prime motive back of most gamblers is the excitement. Gamblers





want to win, but the majority derive pleasure even if they lose. Whereas, the compelling force behind speculation is the desire to win, rather than the excitement." Joe was only happy when throned beneath an Arch of Triumph.

One of Kennedy's acquaintances was a small-town banker who had invested \$120,000 in one movie—*The Miracle Man*, with Lon Chaney—and made three million. Hollywood, it was apparent to Joe, was a prime plum to be picked. His first gambit in the realm of the Silver Screen was the takeover of a chain of three dozen New England movie houses. His ambition did not stop with the thirteen colonies. Kennedy planned to take over movie houses across the country: the Balaban and Katz chain in the Midwest would be his when he ferreted out their Achilles' heel. Alex Pantages, that illiterate Greek peasant with his fancy movie palaces on the West Coast, was also ripe for the picking. Find the weak point—and go for the jugular!

As the Twenties began to roar, movie-going became a national obsession. Hollywood's Satanic mills churned out miles of celluloid weekly. Escapist dreams were a growing market, abetted by the lore of fast living and the glamorous, loose women that accompanied it. (By the end of the decade, sixty million Americans would go to the movies in 21,000 theaters across the country.) Bigger, grander picture palaces were springing up every week.

Yes, there was no business like the infant picture business. Many doubted that it was a rational business at all. Each picture involved fresh problems and different risks. Individual and organizational fortunes swayed dizzily from year to year.

The men at the corporate heights who tried to guess the whims of millions of movie fans were an odd assortment of upstart petty entrepreneurs, recent immigrants, hungry and ambitious Jews on the make, still outsiders in the country's ethnic melting pot. They included the former furrier, Adolph "Whispering Jesus" Zukor, like his future star, La Swanson, a dwarf; Marcus Loew, wholesale fur trader; ex-ragman, ex-scrap iron dealer, Louis B. Mayer; one-time glove salesman Samuel Goldfish—changed to Goldwyn. Only a few, like vaudeville producer Jesse Lasky, had actually been showmen. Haphazard, intuitive, uninhibited, the founders of the movie business were a new breed of self-made mogul. Irish Joe was up against some tough competition. Always a quick study, though, "Go-for-it!" Kennedy caught on faster than most.

Kennedy's timing was perfect. He came on the Hollywood scene at the right time, arriving on a flood tide of prosperity. With his quick grin, open manner, and direct speech laced with profanity, exuding a sort of contagious



sexual energy, he was refreshingly unlike the usual aloof, cold-eyed gents from Wall Street. He looked and behaved like a picture man.

He bought out the floundering British owners of the Robertson–Cole Studios, with some help from the Prince of Wales. In February 1926, Kennedy became the head of FBO Pictures—the Film Booking Offices of America, Inc., buying the Hollywood studio, sight unseen. After moving from Boston to New York, he went to Hollywood for the first time to have a look at his new property.

He discovered a studio that lacked the prestige of the majors, but was doing good steady business grinding out a feature a week at a bargain basement cost of \$30,000 per picture. The lot's biggest asset was Fred Thomson, the first movie cowboy to give his horse star billing. (This was Silver King, a stallion who traveled to work in a deluxe Packard van.) Kennedy signed up Thomson for a new contract—fifteen grand a week, almost twice his former salary.

Although FBO's product was popular in small towns, it had not yet cracked the urban markets—and their big box-office receipts. Kennedy went to see "Roxy" Samuel L. Rothafel. Two of America's titan salesmen looked each other in the eye. "Try a Fred Thomson picture," Joe urged. Roxy demurred—his audiences wanted "flesh and the devil" and plenty of both, not horseflesh. "It won't cost you anything," Kennedy coaxed, and won his point. When *The Sunset Legion*, a Thomson Western, had proved a hit at Roxy's fabled "Cathedral of the Motion Picture," Joe could remark with some disdain, "Roxy didn't know his own audience. Now he plays Westerns all the time."

Further proof of Kennedy's flair for showmanship involved Red Grange, the "Galloping Ghost" of University of Illinois football fame, and later a star

attraction as a professional. Grange had made his availability for pictures known, but studio after studio had turned him down. Kennedy went to his favorite potential audience and put the question: "Would you like to see Red Grange on the screen?" His sons Joe and Jack screamed an instant affirmative answer. Grange starred in *One Minute to Play*, and, ably directed by Sam Wood, the movie proved a big moneymaker.

As my dear devoted readers have already learned from perusing *Holly Baby I*, all was not wine and roses for the dream factory during the Twenties. After a series of unsavory scandals, Hollywood, in the eyes of Middle America, appeared to be a veritable modern Babylon, with Sodom for a suburb. The magnates undertook to clean house by installing Will Hays, Harding's former postmaster general, as the window-dressing "czar" of movie morals.

In a move to upgrade Hollywood's respectability, Kennedy hatched the idea of sending some Tinseltown leaders to lecture at Harvard's business school. Harvard was willing; the speakers were sent. It's a shame there is no record of their discoursing—they must have been priceless. The guest lecturers were functionally illiterate and most had never graduated from high school.

Kennedy gobbled up the theater empire of aging E. F. Albee, offering a price for the vaudeville house circuit that the old man couldn't refuse. At the time of the takeover, shares in the Keith-Albee-Orpheum circuit were selling for \$16 each; two weeks later, they were going for \$50. Again, the golden Kennedy touch. (Later, after a few more Kennedy-inspired mergers, the letters would finally settle down into RKO, trademark of an eventually famous major studio.)

Meanwhile, La Swanson, most glamorous of movie queens, returned





to her Hollywood turf after an uppity sojourn in France filming *Madame Sans Gêne* in authentic locales. When she returned, with her fancy new title, Marquise de la Falaise de la Coudraye, Gloria sent an advance order to Paramount: "Please arrange ovation." Kennedy and Gloria the Marquise then met in the crowd of "ovationers," beneath a barrage of flowers. It was a surefire chemical click—the attraction of opposites, short and tall. Kennedy was charmed by the tiny creature; Gloria cast her net. The vamp batted her mascaraed eyes and cooed, "Joe, you're the best actor in Hollywood."

They became lovers, with the added

spice of a secret trysting place for the horizontal arrangements of their illicit affair. Kennedy, besotted with lust, lost his good business judgment in the perfumed purple satin sheets of his Hollywood Hills love nest. He undertook to finance independent pictures for his mistress under the vanity banner of Gloria Productions, Inc. Gloria would soon know the price of hubris. The Clock of Comeuppance was ticking fast.

Their daring artistic production was to be called *The Swamp*. This enticing quicksand would be helmed by Erich von Stroheim, an undisputed genius, but an erratic one. His movie-making method was to expose miles of film,



improvising as he went along, with uninhibited attention paid to every sexual kink. In *The Swamp*, he told the tale of a convent-bred girl who inherits a string of African bordellos. The climactic scene would show the once-innocent Irish convent girl, who had become a prosperous Madame, on her deathbed, receiving the last rites from a humpy young priest. A strong suggestion of necrophilia was the kicker.

Gloria learned what it meant to be appalled: "Von" kept changing the script daily, a ploy with which he hoped to trap her at the production point of no return. The film was not really "dirty"—it was merely that, in 1928, it was unreleasable.

Gloria screamed over the phone to her lover in New York: "Joe, there's a lunatic in charge here!" Kennedy the Catholic was equally appalled; he knew Czar Hays would never pass this bouquet of Venus's-flytraps. Genius von Stroheim was fired. Kennedy arrived in Tinseltown and, with his rattled paramour, attempted to salvage the mess. First of all, the film was retitled: it became *Queen Kelly* (although the reason for the lady's royalty was that she queened it over a chain of cathouses!). The botched, unfinished movie was never shown in this country; Kennedy saw eight hundred grand—in 1928 big bucks—go flush down the drain.

It was his first big business loss; he took it like a bad loser and was of sour disposition for weeks. During this sour spell, Gloria lost a good deal of her appeal for him. The bloom was off the peach. Though he backed his mistress in her first Talkie-singie, *The Trespasser* (1929), and in an Art-Deco turkey entitled *What a Widow!* (1930), they parted company with some bitterness, with Gloria accusing Joe of leaving her with a mountain of unpaid bills.

Putting Gloria and *The Swamp* behind him, Kennedy threw himself into a



nefarious business scheme. He set about to destroy the reputation of Alex Pantages, in order to swoop in and take over the chain of Pantages movie palaces when the old man was down for the count.

Joe Kennedy's demon had one last





Joseph P. Kennedy presents

# GLORIA SWANSON

## "WHAT A WIDOW"

with OWEN MOORE, LEW LODY, MARGARET JUNGSTON and a Splendid Cast



Gloria Swanson in "What a Widow" with Owen Moore, Lew Lody, Margaret Jungston and a Splendid Cast

Music by  
WALTER PETERS  
Based on the play by the late  
"No. 1" Theatre and the screen  
play by Allan Dwan

ALLAN DWAN  
Director

Another all-time smashing hit for Miss Swanson. A melodrama, sensibly and smartly modern with the star in one of her most beautiful roles and wearing costumes that will make millions gasp with delight.

This story is sure to be her "Alibi." A young beautiful girl marries a man much older than herself. He then seduces her for money's sake. Knowing nothing of the world of men, she does not get outwitted, but is outwitted by her own "What a Widow" brings out "What a Widow" Richard.



joke to play—on Kennedy. Exit Swanson in black satin; enter Eunice Pringle in red satin. The seventeen-year-old Miss Pringle was dispatched to the Pantages Theater—but her mission was not to see a movie. She accused Pantages of

having sexually outraged her in his theater when she applied for a job. A jury eventually found him not guilty.

When his Satanic plot backfired, Kennedy finally gave up on movies. The last refuge of a scoundrel is politics.



Joseph P. Kennedy presents

# GLORIA SWANSON

FOLLOWING her tremendous success in "The Trespasser," one of the finest dramatic achievements of her screen career, Miss Swanson made "What a Widow," which enabled her to handle a role calling for characterization that is popular with her fans the world over—that of light comedy.

As her picture to follow, "What a Widow," one of the most intensely fascinating stories of the year has been selected for this star. It has the dramatic depth of "The Trespasser" and the interesting human appeal of "Manhandled."

It is an original story, written especially for Miss Swanson. Details as to cast, director, title, and other production information will be given later.

Another Kennedy presentation ▲

Joseph Kennedy and wife, Rose—Gloria was also on board ►

